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DIAMOND

THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF MS DHONI

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

MS Dhoni quietly walked away from Chennai Super Kings' captaincy ahead of IPL 2024. There was no social media drama, press conferences, interviews, or shedding of tears in public. Only Dhoni can make it happen despite being a megastar in cricket. The journey, which started in 2008 and went from strength to strength, took its last lap in 2023, with CSK winning the fifth IPL title. Dhoni, who has a knack for identifying talents, gave the leadership responsibility to Rutuaraj Gaikwad after giving him a hint in the previous season. Mahi also wants to ensure Ruturaj is ready as a player by the time he leaves. I have seen Dhoni putting his body on the line to win trophies for Chennai Super Kings. He was at the forefront of his franchise and got the best out of the players over the years. He enjoyed the highs of winning the trophy five times and making it to the playoffs several times. There were also lows in the form of a miserable season in 2022 and his on-field argument with the umpires. Whenever his position was challenged, he returned strongly and showed the world that he was unbreakable. His team failed in 2022, and the veteran had a severe knee injury in the 16th edition. Any other cricketer would have given up due to fitness issues, but Dhoni carried on and lifted the trophy by beating Gujarat Titans in the final. He didn't leave the team mid-way and underwent surgery after the task was completed. The ongoing season could be his last as a player, but he may accept a mentor's role from the following year onwards, as MS Dhoni and CSK can't be separated. The new season has started with CSK winning against RCB. It was a memorable day for Virat Kohli in terms of another milestone. He became the first Indian and the second fastest overall to complete 12,000 runs in T20 format. Kohli didn't score big, with just 21 runs coming from his bat. But even these runs were enough to scrip another record in his illustrious career. Kohli recently returned from London months after the birth of his second child. He missed the five-match Test series against England and is under pressure to make IPL 2024 count to make it to the ICC T20 World Cup 2024 squad. It was an incredible PSL season for Islamabad United, who played impressive cricket throughout the season and thumped Multan Sultans in the final to win the coveted trophy. In other sports, F1 is hogging all the limelight due to the exciting races. Enjoy the action-packed edition of Cricket Today.

MS Dhoni quietly walked away from Chennai Super Kings' captaincy ahead of IPL 2024.

Cricket today

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WHAT'S HOT & NOT

MS DHONI

Dhoni returned from 10 months out. He surprised when he gave up the Chennai captaincy he's mainly held since the league started in 2008. Ruturaj Gaikwad has the armband. Dhoni wasn't captain briefly in 2022 but was restored and continued in 2023 when he led Chennai to a record-equal fifth IPL title. He announced then his intention to retire.

MUSHFIQUR RAHIM

Bangladesh wicketkeeper-batter Mushfiqur Rahim was ruled out of the test series against Sri Lanka by a broken thumb sustained in their one-day international. Mushfiqur was busy, making four catches, figuring in a runout, and finishing 37 not out as Bangladesh beat Sri Lanka by four wickets to seal the ODI series 2-1.

ISLAMABAD UNITED

Islamabad United won the Pakistan Super League after beating Multan Sultans with a last-ball boundary in a thrilling final. Tailender Hunain Shah came in to face the final ball after the dismissal of Naseem Shah and steered fast bowler Mohammad Ali's delivery through point to finish the nailbiter. Multan were restricted to 159-9 on a spinners' paradise.

CRICKET AUSTRALIA

Cricket Australia has postponed a three-match men's Twenty20 international series against Afghanistan scheduled for August due to concerns over deteriorating human rights for women and girls in the Taliban-controlled country. The matches were scheduled to be hosted by Afghanistan but played in the United Arab Emirates.

MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

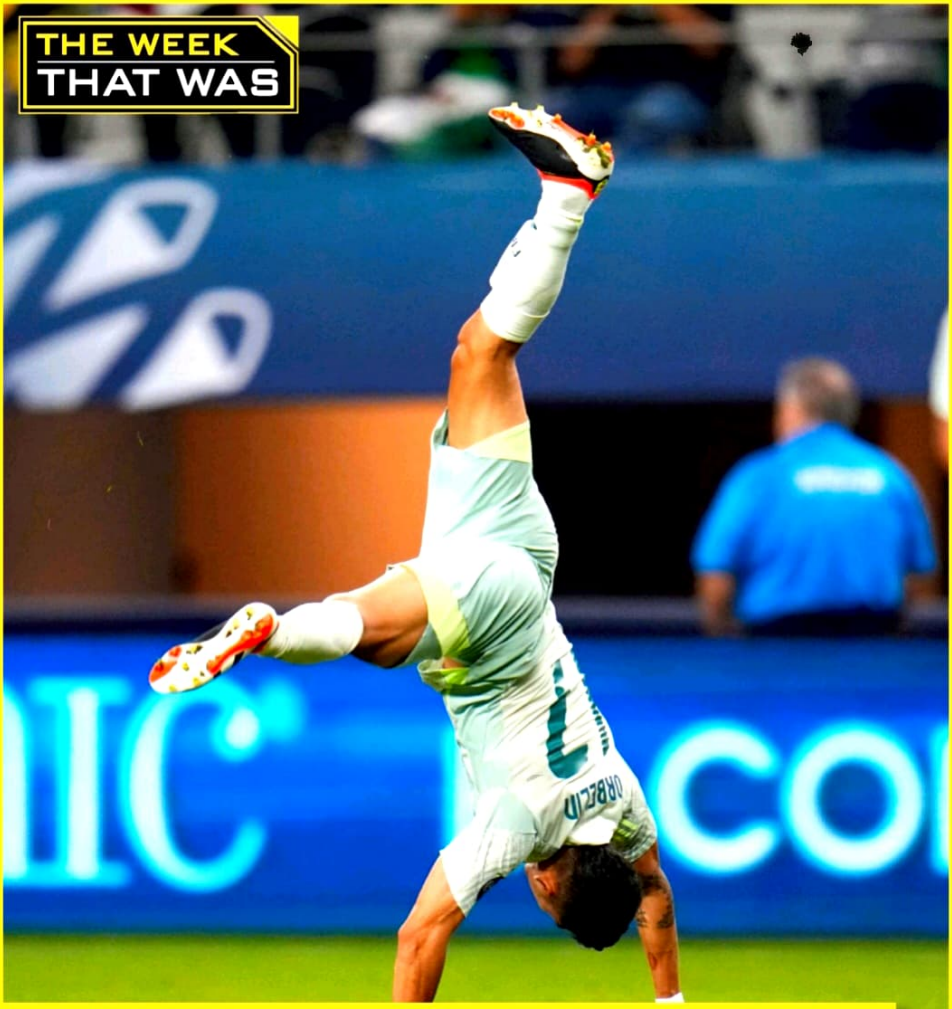
Faf du Plessis chose to bat and gave Bengaluru a good start in the power play when he smacked eight boundaries in his 35 before he fell to Mustafizur Rahman, who took 4-29. Mustafizur dismissed du Plessis and Rajat Patidar in his only over, and then he picked up two more wickets, including Kohli, in his second over midway through the innings.

VIRAT KOHLI

He made a quiet 21 off 20 balls in Bengaluru's sub-par score of 173-6, and Chennai cruised to 176-4 with eight balls to spare in the opening game of the nine-week-long league. Kohli missed international cricket for nearly two months, including India's test series win over England, owing to the birth of his second child.

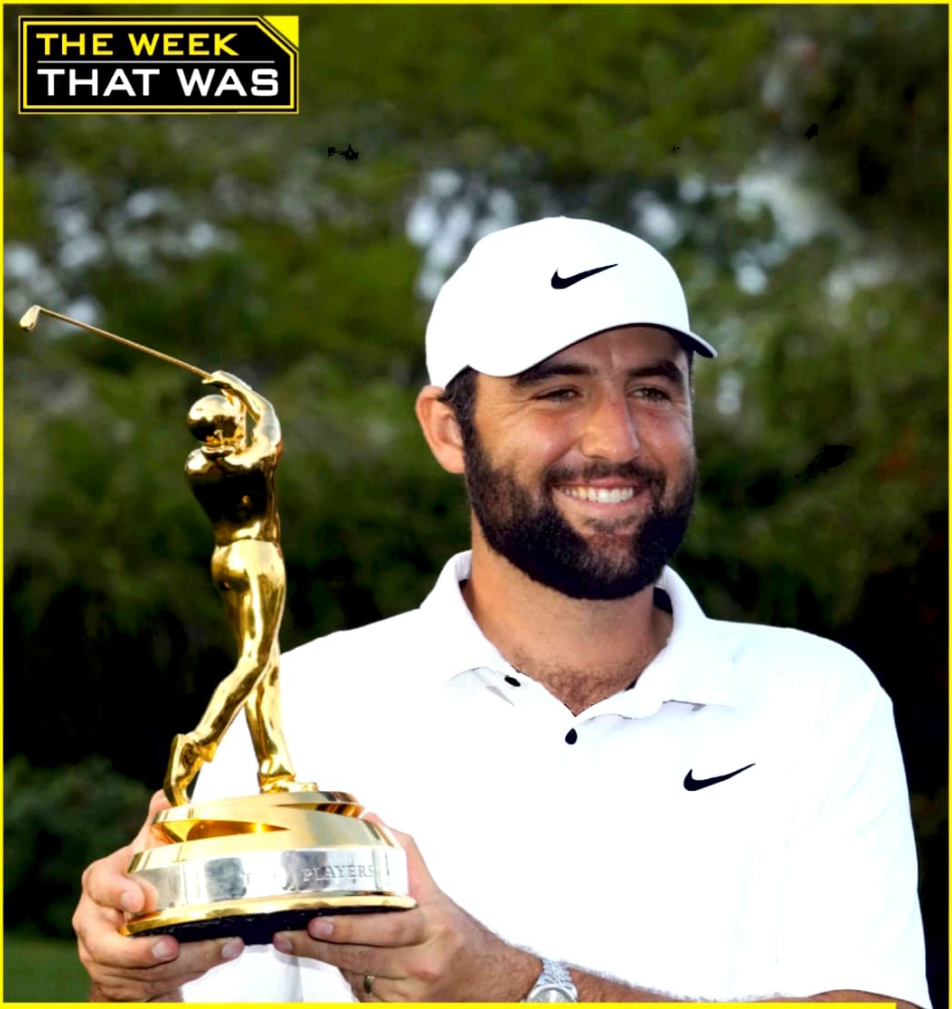
LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION: Chennai Super Kings' captain Ruturaj Gaikwad and Royal Challengers Bengaluru's captain Faf du Plessis chat during the coin toss before the opening match of the Indian Premier League cricket tournament.

GLITTERING OPENING CEREMONY: Bollywood actors Akshay Kumar and Tiger Shroff perform during the opening ceremony of the Indian Premier League cricket tournament before the opening match between Chennai Super Kings and Royal Challengers Bengaluru.



FLIP CELEBRATION: Mexico's Orbelin Pineda does a flip while celebrating his second-half goal against Panama during a CONCACAF Nations League semifinals soccer match.

ARIEL DUEL: Los Angeles Clippers guard James Harden drives to the basket against Portland Trail Blazers guard Delano Banton and forward Kris Murray during the first half of an NBA basketball game in Portland.



EMPHATIC WIN: Scottie Scheffler holds the trophy after winning The Players Championship golf tournament in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

CALM BEFORE THE STORM: Undisputed super middleweight champion Canelo Alvarez poses with boxer Jaime Munguía during a news conference in Beverly Hills, Calif. Alvarez will defend his titles against All-Action Star Jaime Munguía on Saturday, May 4, at T-Mobile Area in Las Vegas.

Cricket Buzz

"A guy from Kerala has to do something special"

- Sanju Samson on competition for places in Team India

BIZZARE REASON TO JOIN RCB

Last week, the Royal Challengers Bengaluru women's team created history by winning the second edition of the Women's Premier League. The title win was a memorable moment for the women's side but put a big question mark on the men's team's performance. The men's team hasn't been able to clinch the IPL trophy in 16 years. Former Zimbabwe captain Andy Flower said that he agreed to join the franchise because of their trophyless campaigns. "It is exciting to work with a franchise which hasn't won a title in 16 years despite being home to big names," Andy Flower said to the Hindustan Times. "It is one of the main reasons I decided to coach the Bengaluru-based team. I want to achieve something special with the group of players. I think the squad is strong, and we have some very experienced players in the dressing room," he added.

"Virat Kohli is the greatest Indian batter and not Gavaskar, Sachin or Dhoni"

- Navjot Singh Sidhu on star batter

VAUGHAN PREDICTS WINNER OF IPL 2024

Former England captain Michael Vaughan is a famous face among Indian fans due to his commentary and habit of mocking the cricket fanatics. He will be a part of a cricketing panel on one of the popular websites during IPL 2024. The legendary batter will soon travel to Mumbai to opine on the performance of the teams and players and why the matches were won and lost. Meanwhile, he has already declared one of the franchises as the winner of the 17th season. According to him, Mumbai Indians will lift the trophy for the sixth time when the season ends. "Can't wait to get over to Mumbai soon .. Btw @mipaltanto won the IPL this year," he wrote on X. In his earlier post, he hoped to see Royal Challengers Bangalore winning the IPL after their women's team clinched the victory in WPL 2024.

IMAD TAKES RETIREMENT U-TURN

Former Pakistan player and the hero of Islamabad United's win in PSL 2024, Imad Wasim, is ready to come out of retirement. Imad announced his retirement last year but could be considered for the ICC T20 World Cup 2024 if he takes back his decision. According to the ICC, Imad would be available for the Men in Green if the team needed him. He revealed that Shaheen Afridi, who leads Pakistan in T20Is, had a chat with him after he announced retirement and told the fast bowler they would chat after the Pakistan Super League. "I became a big player because of Pakistan. If my country needs me, I am always available. I have no issues," Imad Wasim said. "Shaheen Afridi called me after I retired, but I told him we would chat after the Pakistan Super League in 2024."

BCCI PLANNING TO END MEGA DEALS

Pat Cummins and Mitchell Starc, who shone in the World Cup 2023, got big bucks as they both breached the 20-crore mark. However, criticism came their way as several questioned the pay disparity during the IPL mini-auction and players registering them for mini-auction to fetch more. Addressing concerns over pay disparity within the IPL, Chairman Arun Dhumal acknowledged the issue and committed to conducting a thorough review. Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins were bought for INR 24.75 crore and INR 20.50 crore, respectively. To address this pay imbalance during mini-auctions and mega-auctions, IPL officials are contemplating setting a ceiling on individual player prices rather than replacing auctions with drafts entirely.

ROHIT SHARMA DEFENDS HIMSELF

Team India captain Rohit Sharma has often been heard abusing his teammates during the matches. In the five-match Test series against England, Rohit lashed out at the team's youngsters and sometimes crossed the line. He was miffed with the teammates for not following his instructions and being casual while fielding. "I have been caught saying sternly to my teammates during the matches. My words have been heard on stump mic, but I don't use such language to hurt anyone. It is in my nature, and this is how I lead the side. I want to make them realize that they must always be attentive on the field," he said. "I want to ensure that they complete the job given to them. I don't care how they do it, but it has to be done," he added.

HIGHS AND LOWS OF MAHENDRA SINGH DHONI AS CAPTAIN IN THE INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Mahendra Singh Dhoni has stepped down as Chennai Super Kings captain, with Ruturaj Gaikwad replacing the legend ahead of the Indian Premier League 2024 season that starts from Friday onwards. For the second time, Dhoni is now, 42 years old...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Mahendra Singh Dhoni has stepped down as Chennai Super Kings captain, with Ruturaj Gaikwad replacing the legend ahead of the Indian Premier League 2024 season that starts from Friday onwards. For the second time, Dhoni is now, 42 years old, called quits from captaincy. He did so in the IPL 2022 season as CSK named Ravindra Jadeja, who then quit midway through the event, handing Dhoni back the reins. With the future in mind, Dhoni has now decided to move the baton to a younger star. With this decision, one could see Dhoni retire from cricket after the 2024 season. So, this could be his final campaign.

Dhoni has had an incredible journey in the premier 20-over competition since its inception in 2008. He has been the most successful and longest-serving captain. He has also lifted the joint-highest number of IPL honours (5 alongside Rohit Sharma). As an era ends, we decode Dhoni's highs and lows as captain in the IPL alongside his crunch numbers.

HIGHS

HIS CONSISTENCY AND SUCCESS WITH THE FRANCHISE

Dhoni led the Super Kings to eight straight top-four finishes from 2008 to 2015. It's important to know that the team finished runners-up on four counts during this phase and lifted two titles in 2010 and 2011, respectively. CSK were out of the IPL for two years, and upon return, Dhoni successfully led them to the trophy in 2018. He then won two more honours in 2021 and 2023 respectively. Dhoni has been a five-time runner-up with CSK (also in 2019) and a five-time champion, leading the team to 10 finals, which is an IPL record.

HIS NUMBERS TELL A STORY

As per ESPNcricinfo, Dhoni captained in 226 matches. He went on to win 133 matches and lost 91 times (N/R 2). His win percentage of 58.84 is the highest among skippers in the cash-rich league to have led in 50 or more matches. For CSK alone, Dhoni led on 212 occasions, winning 128 and losing 82 matches (N/R 2). His staggering win percentage of 60.95% is mind-boggling. Dhoni remains the second-highest scorer for the Yellow Army with 4508 runs in the competition. He has smashed the most sixes by a CSK player (209) and the second-highest number of fours (316). Dhoni, who managed Rising Pune Supergiant for one season, has the second-highest number of runs as captain in the IPL. His tally of 4660 runs is only behind former RCB skipper Virat Kohli (4994). Dhoni owns the most sixes as captain in IPL history (218). Overall, the veteran is one of the seven players with over 5000 runs in the competition. He has 5082 runs

at 38.79 and a strike rate of 135.91.

DHONI PLAYED HIS PART IN THE IPL FINALS FOR CSK

• **In the** 2008 edition, CSK lost to Rajasthan Royals, but Dhoni smashed a 17-ball 29* at a strike rate worth 170.58. CSK managed 163/5 before losing.

• **In the** IPL 2010 final, Dhoni contributed with a 15-ball 22 in the win versus MI. He also impacted the crucial run out of Abhishek Nayar when MI were 66/1 in the chase.

• **In the** IPL 2011 final, Dhoni hit a 13-ball 22 versus RCB after the openers set a 159-run stand. Dhoni led CSK to a third successive IPL final in 2012 and chipped in with an unbeaten nine-ball 14. However, KKR won, chasing 191.

• **A fourth** straight final in IPL 2013 saw Dhoni smash an unbeaten 45-ball 63. He was the lone warrior in a chase of 149 versus MI as CSK lost (125/9).

• **In the** IPL 2015 final, Dhoni smashed a 13-ball 18 in a one-sided defeat versus MI. In the IPL 2018 final, Dhoni didn't bat but was effective with the stumping of an in-form Kane Williamson (47). CSK beat SRH comfortably.

• **In the** IPL 2021 final, Dhoni marshalled his troops to perfection in a clinical win over KKR. In the IPL 2023 final, Dhoni's magic moment, he ensured Shubman Gill's dismissal. He knocked off the bails in no time.

DHONI GOT THE BEST OUT OF HIS PLAYERS

MS Dhoni didn't always have the best squads at his disposal. However, he made even average sides look good. He also excelled when CSK built solid squads. His way of handling superstars and youngsters spoke volumes. Dhoni read the game beautifully and was always brave in his decision-making. He trusted his troops to deliver in crucial moments, which paid off. Notably, all of the mega stars did exceptionally well under Dhoni. Matthew Hayden, Shane Watson,

Brendon McCullum, Suresh Raina, Fat du Plessis, and Ravindra Jadeja are some major players who will do well for CSK under MSD.

LOWS

A POOR CAMPAIGN FOR RPS IN 2016

Dhoni had a dismal IPL 2016 season for the RPS. He led the side that year but never quite managed to get the best out of the team after eight defining campaigns with Chennai. RPS finished seventh out of 8 teams with five wins and nine defeats. In 12 innings, Dhoni scored 284 runs for RPS but struggled with his strike rate.

AXED AS RPS SKIPPER IN 2017

Dhoni was axed by RPS ahead of the 2017 season, and Steve Smith was appointed as the captain. RPS owner Sanjiv Goenka confirmed back then that Dhoni did not step down but the franchise appointed Smith. Goenka said RPS did not have a good 2016 season and they wanted someone young to lead the side and revamp it. As per a Crictracker report, Dhoni was said to be miffed by the decision and had to be persuaded by RPS management to continue as a player.

PAIN OF IPL 2020 AND 2022

In IPL 2020, CSK ended up second-last with 12 points on the board. Dhoni was criticised for his overall show and decision-making. He was rusty with the bat after announcing his retirement from international cricket earlier. In the same season, fans criticised Dhoni for changing the umpire's mind about wide calls. He had a poor campaign, scoring 200 runs with a poor strike rate of 116.27. IPL 2022 saw Jadeja kick-off as captain after Dhoni handed the baton. CSK had a poor start, and Jadeja quit after 8 games. CSK finished second-last with 10 defeats and four wins. Although CSK performed perhaps their worst in a season. Dhoni showed enough meat as a batter. However, CSK weren't ready to have Jadeja as captain with a sudden move from Dhoni to step down. Dhoni may have had a few lows in the premier 20-over league, but his highs are more, and one would hope he shows character. At 42, Dhoni will still have a role to play. He could once again bat low down the order and protect his body. ■

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE 2024 SEASON: MAJOR RECORDS THAT CAN BE BROKEN

The 2024 season of the Indian Premier League (IPL) starts from March 22 onwards, with Chennai Super Kings facing Royal Challengers Bangalore at the Chepauk. Since the IPL's inception in 2008, the cash-rich league has entered its 17th season...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

The 2024 season of the Indian Premier League (IPL) starts from March 22 onwards, with Chennai Super Kings facing Royal Challengers Bangalore at the Chepauk. Since the IPL's inception in 2008, the cash-rich league has entered its 17th season. Defending champions Chennai enter the season as the favourites despite MS Dhoni stepping down as captain. Over the years, the tournament witnessed several records being hammered, and this

year, the spectacle is set to continue once again. Ahead of a blockbuster IPL 2024 season, we present the major records that can be broken.

MAJOR BATTING RECORDS ON OFFER

VIRAT KOHLI: 35-year-old Virat Kohli, who has 11994 runs in the 20-over format, is six shy of the 12000-run mark. He will become the first Indian to register the feat and be the sixth player overall. Kohli has 99 50-plus scores in the 20-over format and needs one more to register a mark of 100. Kohli is the top scorer in IPL history with a tally of 7263 runs at 37.24. He has 50 half-centuries and seven fifties. Kohli owns 985 runs versus Chennai in the IPL and is 15 shy of the 1000-run mark. He will become the second player after Shikhar Dhawan to reach the milestone. As per ESPNcricinfo, Kohli owns 979 runs against left-arm spinners in the IPL and is 21 shy of 1000 runs. Kohli has smashed 234 sixes and is in line to reach a milestone of 250. He also closes in on 400 sixes in the 20-over format (371). Kohli is nearing 2500 runs in the IPL power play. He has 2335 runs.

SHIKHAR DHAWAN: Punjab Kings captain Shikhar Dhawan has been a consistent force in the IPL. He has scored 6617 runs at 35.38. Dhawan is 383 runs away from becoming the second player in IPL history to score 7000 runs. Dhawan is also two maximums away from a mark of 150 in the IPL (148). Dhawan owns 9645 runs in the 20-over format and is 355 runs shy of 10000. He will become the third Indian to achieve the mark after Kohli and Rohit Sharma. Dhawan is the top scorer against Mumbai Indians with 901 runs. He could become the first player to smoke 1000 runs against the five-time champions. Dhawan

can become the 3rd batter to smash 1000 runs versus KKR (907). Dhawan owns 833 runs for Punjab Kings and is 177 away from a mark of 1000. He averages 39.66. Dhawan has 3292 runs in the IPL powerplay overs and is closing in on a mark of 3500.

DAVID WARNER: Australian sensation David Warner has been a leading force in the IPL. Warner could become the first foreign batter to smack 6500 runs in the IPL. He has 6397 runs at 41.53. Warner can get to 250 sixes with a mark of 24. Former SRH skipper Warner owns 2383 runs for Delhi Capitals. He is 117 away from becoming the second player to smash 2500 runs for the franchise. Warner is closing in on 450 sixes in the 20-over format, having smashed 434.

ROHIT SHARMA: Veteran Mumbai Indians star Rohit Sharma owns 11156 runs in the 20-over format. He aims to become the first Indian batter to smash 500 sixes (487). Of Rohit's 6211 runs in the IPL, 1866 have come during the power play overs. He is 134 shy of 2000 runs during this phase. Rohit has played 198 matches for MI and is two shy of 200. Meanwhile, he is set to appear in 250 IPL matches (243).

MS DHONI: IPL legend MS Dhoni can become the highest scorer for CSK. Dhoni, who has 4508 runs, can topple Suresh Raina, who owns 4687 runs for the Yellow Army. Overall, Dhoni has scored 5082 runs in the competition. Dhoni is set to become the second-oldest player in IPL history after Pravin Tambe. At 42 years and 259 days, Dhoni will only be behind Tambe, aged 44 years and 219 days. Overall, Dhoni will be the third oldest to feature in the IPL. Dhoni is also on the verge of 250 IPL sixes (239) and 350 IPL fours (349).

Other batting records on offer in the 2024 season

- Ajinkya Rahane is four hits away from 100 IPL sixes and 100 shy of 4500 runs.
- Sanju Samson has 3888 IPL runs and is 112 shy of the 4000-run mark.
- Suryakumar Yadav is closing in on 7000 runs in the 20-over format (6969). He is also nearing 3500 IPL runs (3249).
- Jos Buttler is nearing the 500 sixes mark in 20-over format (474) besides 1000 fours (999).
- Quinton de Kock is 93 shy of the 3000-run mark. He is also nearing 9500 runs in the 20-over format (9349).
- Rishabh Pant is nearing the 3000-run mark in IPL (2838).
- Wriddhiman Saha, Shubman Gill, Shreyas Iyer and David Miller are all set to breach the 3000-run mark in IPL.
- Shubman Gill can become the first Gujarat Titans batter to smash 1500 runs (1373).
- CSK skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad is nearing the 2000-run mark in IPL (1797).
- Yashasvi Jaiswal can get to 2500 runs in the 20-over

format. He has 2322 runs at 30.96.
• KL Rahul is on the verge of 600 fours in 20 overs cricket and 300 sixes.
• Manish Pandey can get to 7000 runs in 20 overs cricket (6849).
• Venkatesh Iyer can get to 1000 runs for KKR (956).

MAJOR BOWLING RECORDS ON OFFER

YUZVENDRA CHAHAL: IPL's leading wicket-taker, Yuzvendra Chahal, owns 187 scalps at 21.68. He is 13 shy of becoming the first player to claim 200 wickets. He can become the first Indian bowler to take 350 wickets in the 20-over format (336). Chahal has 48 wickets for RR in the IPL and can become the second spinner and fourth overall to take 50-plus wickets. He will also become the fastest bowler to take 50 scalps for RR.

PIYUSH CHAWLA: Former Punjab, KKR, and CSK spinner Piyush Chawla had a defining IPL 2023 season for MI. Chawla, who owns 179 IPL wickets, can get to 200 with a tally of 21. He can become the second-highest wicket-taker in IPL history by surpassing Dwayne Bravo (183).

BHUVNESHAR KUMAR: SRH legend Bhuvneshwar Kumar owns 288 scalps in the shortest format. He is 12 shy of 300 scalps. Bhuvneshwar owns 170 IPL wickets and needs 14 to become the most successful pacer in the competition by surpassing Bravo. Bhuvneshwar has 146 scalps for SRH and is four short of 150. He will become the first to do so.

RASHID KHAN: Gujarat sensation Rashid Khan is back with a bang after a long injury absence. He was terrific for Afghanistan in the recently concluded series versus Ireland. Rashid owns 139 IPL wickets and is 11 shy of 150. With Mohammed Shami ruled out, Rashid, who has 46 scalps for Gujarat, is four shy of 50. He will become the first to do so for the franchise.

OTHER BOWLING RECORDS ON OFFER

• Jasprit Bumrah has 145 IPL wickets and is five shy of 150.
• Sunil Narine owns 163 IPL wickets and can become the first foreigner to take 175 wickets or more in the competition.
• Narine can get to 550 wickets in the 20-over format (535).
• Andre Russell has 96 IPL wickets and is four shy of 100.
• Mustafizur Rahman has 293 wickets in 20 overs format and is 7 shy of 300.
• Trent Boult and Kagiso Rabada can get to 250 wickets in T20s.

OTHER RECORDS THAT CAN BE SCALED

• Rohit (98), Ravindra Jadeja (97) and Dhawan (96) can all get to 100-plus IPL catches.
• Samson (45) is five matches away from joining the list of 50 or more matches led by a captain. ■

FEATURE

DECODING BATTERS WITH MOST RUNS IN T20S AS VIRAT KOHLI ENTERS EXCLUSIVE LIST

Virat Kohli became the first Indian batter to smash 12000 runs in T20 cricket. He attained the milestone in match number one of the Indian Premier League 2024 season against the Chennai Super Kings at Chepauk. Kohli scored a 20-ball 21 before...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Virat Kohli became the first Indian batter to smash 12000 runs in T20 cricket. He attained the milestone in match number one of the Indian Premier League 2024 season against the Chennai Super Kings at Chepauk. Kohli scored a 20-ball 21 before being dismissed by Mustafizur Rahman. Kohli also went past 1000 runs against Chennai Super Kings, becoming the second player to do so after Shikhar Dhawan. Kohli has been a legend across formats, scoring over 11000 runs in First-Class cricket and 15000 in List-A cricket. He has now added another massive feather in his illustrious cap.

Here, we decode players with the most runs in the 20-over format.

CHRIS GAYLE (14562)

Universe King Chris Gayle holds the record for most runs in T20s. The former West Indian ace dominated leagues across the world. In 463 matches, Gayle smashed a total of 14562 runs at 36.22. He carried a strike rate of 144.75. He went on to smash 22 centuries and 88 half-centuries. Gayle ended his career with 1132 fours and 1056 sixes. His sixes count remains the highest in the format. Notably, 1899 of his runs came in T20Is for West Indies. Gayle was an IPL legend as well. He went on to register a total of 4965 runs from 142 matches.

SHOAIB MALIK (13360)

Shoaib Malik is still going strong at 42 years of age. He was recently seen in the Pakistan Super League, scoring 254 runs from 10 matches. Before that, he

played in the Bangladesh Premier League, scoring 113 runs from seven games. Malik has smashed 13360 runs from 542 matches at 36.40. He has 83 fifties under his belt. Malik has smashed 1041 fours and 420 sixes. Malik is the fourth-highest scorer in PSL history. He owns 2336 runs at 33.37. Meanwhile, 2423 runs of Malik have come for Pakistan. He remains their 4th-highest scorer.

KIERON POLLARD (12900)

Veteran West Indian legend Kieron Pollard is third on the list regarding most runs in the 20-over format. In 660 matches, Pollard has smashed 12900 runs and is 100 shy of 13000. He averages 31.46 and carries a strike rate of 150.98. He has one century and 59 fifties. Pollard has clobbered 810 fours and 860 sixes. Pollard was recently seen in the 2024 edition of the PSL. Pollard finished his IPL stint as a player in the 2022 season. In 189 IPL matches for the Mumbai Indians, he clobbered 3412 runs at 28.67, striking at 147.32. Notably, 1569 Pollard's 12900 runs in the 20-over format came for West Indies. Pollard averaged 25.30 for WI and carried a strike rate of 135.14.

ALEX HALES (12319)

England's Alex Hales has played 449 matches in the 20-over format, scoring 12319 runs at 29.68. He carries a strike rate of 146.39. He owns six centuries and 78 fifties in the 20-over format. Hales has clobbered 1361 fours and 494 sixes. Two thousand seventy-four of Hales' runs in T20s have come for England. He averages 30.95 and owns a strike rate of 138.35. Hales was recently seen playing in the PSL 2024 season, scoring 148 runs from 10 matches for winners Islamabad United. Hales, who has played in several global leagues worldwide, appeared in a handful of six games in the IPL. He smashed 148 runs in the 2018 season.

DAVID WARNER (12065)

David Warner will want to have a dream Indian Premier League 2024 season with the Delhi Capitals. Warner has played 370 matches in the 20-over format and owns 12065 runs at 37.12. His strike rate reads 140.17. Warner is the only player with 100-plus fifties in T20s (101) and eight centuries. Warner owns 1215 fours and 434 sixes. Three thousand ninety-nine of Warner's runs have come for Australia from 103 matches. He is one of the two batters with 3000-plus runs for the Aussies alongside Aaron Finch (3120). Warner is the top scorer among foreign players in the IPL. He has 6397 runs at 41.53. Warner's strike rate reads 139.91. He is the player with the most 50-plus scores in the IPL (65). He is the only player with 60-plus fifties (61). Overall, Warner is the 3rd-highest scorer in IPL history.

VIRAT KOHLI (12015)

Virat Kohli is the latest entrant to this illustrious club. With his 21-run score versus CSK, Kohli has raced to 12015 runs at 41.14. His strike rate reads 133.36. Kohli played his 377th match in the format. He owns 1074 fours and 372 sixes. Notably, 4037 of his runs have come for India in T20Is. He is the only player with 4000-plus runs in the format. Kohli averages a solid 51.75 with a strike rate of 138.15. He has 37 fifties and a ton. In the 20-over format overall, Kohli has 99 fifty-plus scores. He has 91 fifties and eight tons. Meanwhile, the 35-year-old is the top scorer in IPL history. He has destroyed 7284 runs at 37.16. His strike rate is 129.93. He is one of the two Indian batters with 50 fifties. He also owns the most number of centuries in the cash-rich league with 7. Kohli has 643 fours and 235 sixes.

Meanwhile, the likes of Aaron Finch (11458), Rohit Sharma (11156), Jos Buttler (11146) and Colin Munro (10961) are the batters to complete the top 10 in terms of runs in the 20-over format. ■

TOUR POSTPONED OVER HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION

Cricket Australia has postponed a three-match men's Twenty20 international series against Afghanistan scheduled for August due to concerns over deteriorating human rights for women and girls...

BY STAFF WRITER

Cricket Australia has postponed a three-match men's Twenty20 international series against Afghanistan scheduled for August due to concerns over deteriorating human rights for women and girls in the Taliban-controlled country. The matches were scheduled to be hosted by Afghanistan but played in the United Arab Emirates.

It marks the third time Cricket Australia has declined to play the Afghan team since the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan in September 2021 and placed restrictions on female participation in sports, work, education and travel. The Australians previously cancelled a test match scheduled to be played in Hobart in November 2021 and a three-match ODI series set for March of last year. The teams have met in international tournaments, with Australia edging Afghanistan in the 50-over World Cup in India on the way to winning the title last year. Cricket Australia on Tuesday said advice from the Australian government was "that conditions for women and girls in Afghanistan are getting worse."

"For this reason, we have maintained our previous position and will postpone the bilateral series against Afghanistan," a CA statement read. "CA continues its strong commitment to supporting participation by women and girls in cricket worldwide and will continue to actively engage the International Cricket Council and work closely with the Afghanistan Cricket Board to determine what actions could be taken to support the resumption of bilateral matches."

Afghanistan is the only country with a full International Cricket Council membership that does not have a women's team. ■

ISLAMABAD UNITED: THE CHAMPIONS OF PAKISTAN

Islamabad United won the Pakistan Super League after beating Multan Sultans with a last-ball boundary in a thrilling final. Tailender Hunain Shah came in to face the final ball after the dismissal...

BY STAFF WRITER

Islamabad United won the Pakistan Super League after beating Multan Sultans with a last-ball boundary in a thrilling final. Tailender Hunain Shah came in to face the final ball after the dismissal of Naseem Shah and steered fast bowler Mohammad Ali's delivery through point to finish the nailbiter. Multan was restricted to 159-9 on a spinners' paradise after Islamabad allrounder Imad Wasim grabbed 5-23 and captain Shadab Khan picked up 3-32.

"The sign of a good team is they win even without playing a perfect game," said Shadab, who was named player of the league after scoring 305 runs and taking 14 wickets.

Islamabad's chase got a great start from opener Martin Guptill, stumbled in the middle, then got a great finish from Wasim, 19 not out, and Naseem, 17. Islamabad reached 163-8 to add to its titles in 2016 and 2018.

"To pick a five-for in a final and to stay in (batting) during a crucial game, it was a new experience," Wasim said. "We should have finished the game earlier rather than taking it down to the wire. I'm glad Hunain finished it."

It was heartbreaking for Multan, which lost last year's final to Lahore Qalandars by one run. Playing its fourth consecutive final, Multan won the group stage and was the favorite in the final.

"The match goes to the last ball, you can't really point out any flaw," Multan skipper Mohammad Rizwan said.

"Credit to Imad for picking a five-for and scoring those crucial runs. There were a few ups and downs in the batting, but they played really well. Congratulations to Islamabad. It was fun to play tonight in front of a packed house." Islamabad gained momentum in the playoffs thanks mainly to Wasim's brilliant all-round show.

Guptill hit a 30-ball 50 before he was run out in the 13th over at 102-4. Multan kept coming back strongly through its spinners Khushdil Shah (2-21) and Iftikhar Ahmed (2-19). League leading wicket-taker Usama Mir, who finished with 23 wickets, dismissed dangerman Azam Khan on 30 in the death overs and, when Ahmed plucked a superb return catch off Faheem Ashraf at 129-7, Islamabad still needed 31 off the last 17 balls. Naseem smashed a quickfire 17 off nine balls and Imad kept his cool to guide Islamabad to a sensational two-wicket win.

Earlier, Wasim wrecked Multan's top order with the wickets of Yasir Khan and David Willey in his first over. In-form Usman Khan, who scored two centuries this season, revived Multan hopes with a gritty 57 off 40 balls before Wasim struck back in the middle overs by dismissing Johnson Charles. Wasim capped his brilliant bowling by taking the wickets of Khushdil Shah and Chris Jordan in his final over. Ahmed boosted Multan's total with a breezy 32 off 20 balls that included three sixes and three fours. ■

BRISBANE OLYMPICS ORGANIZERS SCRAP PLANS FOR THEIR 2032 CENTERPIECE

Brisbane Olympics organizers have scrapped plans to demolish and rebuild an iconic cricket ground as the centerpiece of the 2032 Games while also rejecting a review panel's recommendation for a new stadium in city parklands. Queensland state's Premier...

BY STAFF WRITER

Brisbane Olympics organizers have scrapped plans to demolish and rebuild an iconic cricket ground as the centerpiece of the 2032 Games while also rejecting a review panel's recommendation for a new stadium in city parklands. Queensland state's Premier Steven Miles instead announced he'd prefer to upgrade an existing rugby stadium close to downtown Brisbane to host the opening and closing ceremonies. Miles called for an independent review of Olympic planning in January as backlash intensified against the tripling of the cost to redevelop the so-called Gabba stadium.

Brisbane's former mayor Graham Quirk led a 60-day review which handed its findings to the Miles' state government on Monday, two days after council elections across the state. The review delivered 30 recommendations, the central feature being construction of a new 55,000-seat stadium at Victoria Park at a cost of 3.4 billion Australian dollars ($2.23 billion) instead of redeveloping the Gabba.

"I know that I said I'd do what the Quirk review recommended, but I cannot support the option they have landed on" regarding a new stadium, Miles told a news conference at Suncorp Stadium, the long-time home of the National Rugby League powerhouse Brisbane Broncos. "I ordered this review because I'd heard from Queenslanders that A$2.7 billion at the Gabba was too much, so I know that for Queenslanders A$3.4 billion at Victoria Park will be too much, so I'm ruling that out."

He said the option to upgrade Suncorp Stadium, which is walking distance of multiple train stations and the city, would make it ideal to host the opening and closing ceremonies for the Olympics. His government also plans to upgrade another existing stadium in the city's south to host track and field. The stadium, now known as the Queensland Sport and Athletics Center, was the main venue for the 1982 Commonwealth Games.

The Australian Broadcasting Corp reported the total cost to refurbish those two stadiums would be A$1 billion ($66 million). Organizers still need to finalize where an indoor stadium will be built to host swimming during the Olympics and later be converted into an indoor arena and concert venue.

Quirk earlier told the ABC that the cost to build a new stadium on the former council-owned golf course "is likely to be marginally more" than the A$3 billion ($2 billion) for the full Gabba rebuild but "with better operational efficiencies and outcomes that would deliver a true international standard venue."

"If a full Gabba rebuild was to occur, you still don't end up with a top-level tier one stadium because of the fact that it's very limited by space, and for that reason, that's where we landed on Victoria Park," he said Monday on ABC radio. "This is about building what is needed, and a legacy for the people of Queensland."

Debate over the plan to demolish and rebuild the existing stadium in the suburb of Woolloongabba, originally built in 1895 and most recently redeveloped in 2005, has raged since the plan was confirmed in November. Australian Olympic Committee president Ian Chesterman last month indicated he didn't like the idea of rebuilding an aging stadium as one of its centerpiece venues for the 2032 Games. International Olympic Committee vice-president John Coates, who was instrumental in helping secure the Summer Games for Australia's third-largest city, also offered alternatives to the Gabba.

"We've put it to the review committee we should abandon the Gabba and we should look for another site for the athletics," Coates told local media last month. Coates proposed the opening ceremony be held at 52,000-seat Suncorp Stadium, formerly known as Lang Park, and track and field at the 48,000-capacity QSAC facility under IOC's so-called "New Norm" concept that aim to avoid cost blowouts for host cities. The Miles government apparently has taken that advice, despite the Quirk review noting the transport and logistics issues meant "QSAC Stadium does not represent value for money."

Under the original bid plans, the Queensland state government unveiled a 2.7 billion Australian dollar ($1.7 billion) Gabba rebuild that would have forced cricket and the Brisbane Lions Australian Rules Football team to relocate from 2025 to 2030. Critics pointed to escalating costs after the plan's price tag blew out to almost three times the original estimate in the Olympic bid. Brisbane won the 2032 hosting rights in July 2021, when the bid was led by state Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk. The long-standing premier quit in December amid falling opinion polls and was replaced by her former deputy Miles, who instigated the Olympics review. ■

SOCIAL BUZZ

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@virendersehwag

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@parthiv9

"so good to see everyone fit and available..#IPL2024"

@gilly381

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@hardikpandya7

"In my 10th IPL season, grateful for the journey, for the growth, for everything that's come my way"

TOP STORIES

"Many things are uncertain after the European Championship"

- Toni Kroos on his future in football

"Real Madrid once again condemns these violent attacks of racism, discrimination and hate"

- Spanish giants on fan abuse of Vinícius

BAIL TO SOCCER STAR DANI ALVES

A Spanish court decided that Brazilian soccer star Dani Alves could leave prison if he pays a bail of one million euros ($1.1 million) and hands over his passports while awaiting the appeal of his conviction for raping a woman in Barcelona. Alves was found guilty of having raped the woman in a nightclub in 2022 and sentenced to four years and six months in prison. He denied wrongdoing during the three-day trial. He has been behind bars since being arrested in January 2023. His prior requests to be released on bail were denied because the court deemed him a flight risk. Brazil does not extradite its own citizens when they are sentenced in other countries. To now go free, in addition to the bail money, the 40-year-old Alves is also required to hand over his Brazilian and Spanish passports and is prohibited from leaving the country.

NINE-YEAR PRISON TERM FOR RAPE

A Brazilian high court ruled that former soccer star Robinho must serve his nine-year prison sentence in his home nation as a result of his 2017 rape conviction in Italy. Lawyers for the 40-year-old Robinho said they will file a request for habeas corpus at Brazil's Supreme Court so he can remain free while he appeals. Judges on Brazil's Superior Court of Justice in the capital city of Brasília voted 9-2 to validate the conviction of the former Real Madrid, Manchester City and AC Milan striker. Robinho was sentenced in Italy to nine years in prison for his part in a group sexual assault in 2013 when he played for AC Milan. Brazil doesn't extradite nationals, which led Italy to seek his imprisonment in his home nation. "Brazil cannot be a shelter for criminals," judge Mauro Campbell Marques said during his vote.

POLICE RAID SPANISH SOCCER FEDERATION

Spanish police arrested at least six people and raided the offices of the Spanish soccer federation and a property belonging to former president Luis Rubiales as part of a corruption and money laundering investigation that includes suspicions regarding the federation's deal to take the Spanish Super Cup to Saudi Arabia. Spain's Guardia Civil said that Rubiales was not among the six arrested. But a person with knowledge of the operation told The Associated Press that Rubiales was outside the country when his residence in the southern city of Granada was raided and that he is among the five additional people officially put under investigation. The person was not authorized to speak publicly about the operation.

BLOW FOR GERMANY

Germany's preparations for the European Championship were dealt a blow Wednesday with Manuel Neuer's thigh injury ahead of the goalkeeper's planned comeback. Germany's World Cup captain had been due to return to the national team after breaking his leg in a skiing accident, but he sustained a muscle fiber tear in his left adductor during training, the German soccer federation said. It said the 37-year-old Neuer will miss Germany's upcoming friendlies against France and the Netherlands but didn't give any further indication of how long he will miss. Neuer had already left the squad. Germany plays France in Lyon on Saturday, then the Netherlands in Frankfurt on Tuesday. Neuer broke his leg while skiing shortly after returning from the 2022 World Cup and hasn't played for Germany since. He spent more than 10 months out of the game before reestablishing himself as Bayern Munich's No. 1.

COURTOIS TEARS MENISCUS IN KNEE

Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois has sustained another serious knee injury, just as he was close to returning from a torn ACL. Madrid said Courtois ruptured the meniscus in his right knee during training session. The Belgian has not played since tearing the ACL in his left knee in August, two days before Madrid's first game of the season. He just recently returned to training after recovering from surgery. Madrid did not give a timeline for how long Courtois will be out this time, saying only that "the injury will be monitored." Courtois had said in December that he did not expect to be fit for this summer's European Championship in Germany because of the ACL injury, but that he was hoping to start playing for Madrid again before the end of the season.

F1 NEEDS TO TAKE CONTROL OF THE RED BULL DRAMA AS HORNER ACCUSER FILES FIA COMPLAINT

If Christian Horner had his way, this messy saga over an allegation of misconduct made against him by an employee would be forgotten by now. He was cleared of wrongdoing by parent company Red Bull ahead of Formula 1's season-opening race last month...

BY STAFF WRITER

If Christian Horner had his way, this messy saga over an allegation of misconduct made against him by an employee would be forgotten by now. He was cleared of wrongdoing by parent company Red Bull ahead of Formula 1's season-opening race last month and Horner has delivered on his "business as usual" promise. Max Verstappen and Sergio Perez have gone 1-2 the first two races for Red Bull, and Horner, alongside his former pop star wife, has celebrated as Verstappen won for the 18th and 19th time in the last 20 races.

Enough is enough about the personal stuff, Horner complained after the second Red Bull rout: "I think it is time now to draw a line under it."

It doesn't seem to be going away. The investigation into Horner will again be a top topic when F1 this week goes to Melbourne for the Australian Grand Prix. The employee who accused Horner of misconduct has been suspended by parent company Red Bull.

A communications team has now been hired by the employee, The Associated Press has learned. The employee has both exercised the right to appeal Red Bull's clearance of Horner, and as of "end of last week," had filed a formal complaint with F1 governing body FIA, the communications firm confirmed Monday. The FIA says only that any complaint would go to an independent compliance officer and ethics committee. Those are separate from the FIA, which happens to be currently investigating its own president over two whistleblower complaints. If that seems contradictory, welcome to the party.

F1 and its American owner, Liberty Media Co., have said nothing. Neither has any legal grounds to take any sort of action against Red Bull Racing; F1 says it's up to the FIA. Only one of Red Bull's sponsors has publicly demanded answers, and Ford Motor Co. found that Red Bull really doesn't care what its future engine partner wants to know. The report that cleared Horner of misconduct has allegedly been withheld from anyone who has asked to see it, including stakeholders with millions pegged on the stability and excellence of Red Bull and its competitors. So on the season has gone, already a Red Bull runaway. Horner hasn't missed a thing, remaining in his role as team principal with former "Spice Girl" wife, Geri Halliwell, by his side in celebratory support. The easy punchline is wondering if all this drama will warrant, say, a 2-hour Netflix special on "Drive To Survive" but the truth is that serious allegations are being swept under the rug without transparency and almost certainly without the approval of the employee who brought the complaint.

F1 can't be a real sport if something official isn't done to investigate Red Bull, can it?

Red Bull would certainly be under a different level of scrutiny if it operated as a United States team, The NFL or NBA or MLB would all certainly investigate Red Bull and have smothered this a month ago before it became a watershed moment in a test of the entire series. Even if some details were kept private, punishments would not.

The FIA rules required a complaint to be lodged and now, officially, one has been lodged. Someone has to step up and push this toward resolution, to show leadership of a series that has done nothing but grow in popularity for the past decade-plus. The FIA seems toothless here; it is still stinging from its offseason investigation into the potential sharing of information between Mercedes boss Toto Wolff, and his wife, Susie, who as head of the F1 Academy is an F1 employee.

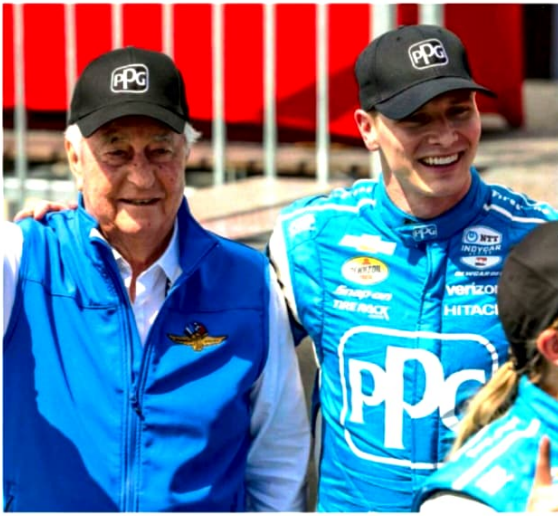
The FIA said there had been a complaint; the next day, all nine other teams released identically worded statements denying they'd complained and the FIA quickly closed the investigation. Susie Wolf is still awaiting an apology from the FIA. This topic has sucked all the air out of the room for F1. Nothing else matters right now, from Lewis Hamilton's final season at Mercedes and the leadership changes at Haas to Michael Andretti's failed bid to join F1 and the FIA's other investigations. All of that is secondary to Red Bull telling everyone to mind their own business.

Someone has to show what kind of business F1 really is by demanding something more out of Red Bull. Be it F1, or the FIA, or every sponsor tied to Red Bull right now, someone needs to clean this up. Or is everyone just going to take Red Bull's word for it? ■

TEAM PENSKE STEPS UP FOR CAPTAIN WHEN ROGER PENSKE'S LEADERSHIP OF INDYCAR IS QUESTIONED

There's no better message to send to critics than an absolute domination, which was the exact Team Penske response after rival team owners took aim at Roger Penske's series leadership. Penske silently fumed at the criticism — which included a bold call...

BY STAFF WRITER



There's no better message to send to critics than an absolute domination, which was the exact Team Penske response after rival team owners took aim at Roger Penske's series leadership. Penske silently fumed at the criticism — which included a bold call from Michael Andretti for the 87-year-old Penske to sell IndyCar if he won't up his investments into series marketing and promotion — but refused to engage in a public battle with disgruntled stakeholders. Instead, a renewed Josef Newgarden led all three Penske drivers to top-four finishes in Sunday's race. Newgarden earned the 30th win of his IndyCar career, while Scott McLaughlin finished third and Will Power was fourth.

"What did you think about our team today," Penske texted The Associated Press after the race while using the emoji of the smiling face with stars in its eyes.

It was the pick-me-up Penske needed after a tumultuous weekend following a six-month offseason filled mostly with disappointing news. Among the speedbumps IndyCar encountered since its September season finale was the delay of its long developed hybrid engine until after the Indianapolis 500; criticism from Honda that sounded as if the engine manufacturer is

willing to leave the series when its contract expires, and the forced move of the season finale from the streets of Nashville to the speedway located 35 miles away from the iconic downtown. But team owners have a variety of complaints, including a push for a charter system similar to the one in NASCAR that creates a franchise model that guarantees a return on their investment for participation in the series. There's frustration over the current car, which on Sunday opened its 12th consecutive season virtually unchanged, and an overall dissatisfaction that IndyCar races aren't promoted at the same level as Formula 1 or NASCAR.

Drivers even began to take shots at the packaged project when a handful complained that post-race podium celebrations outside of the Indy 500 are amateur and not indicative of the accomplishment achieved in succeeding in the highly competitive American open-wheel series. IndyCar and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway are both owned by Roger Penske, who took control of both just two months before the COVID-19 shutdown. He kept both the series and speedway in business, hosted the Indianapolis 500 without spectators at a massive financial loss, and continued to pay teams their scheduled bonus money out of his own pocket.

Those were all points rival team owner Chip Ganassi made in his defense of Penske's leadership, and Penske himself dismissed the comparisons of "F1 does it this way" or "but NASCAR does it that way" because IndyCar has a fraction of media rights deals the other series hold, and nothing close to the revenue stream of the other two series. Plus, IndyCar isn't trying to be F1 or NASCAR. It's trying to be IndyCar, and the single unanimous subject in the paddock is that America's open-wheel series is the most competitive in the world. Yes, Newgarden dominated in his pole-winning Sunday win, but IndyCar a year ago had seven different winners and is the most diverse series in that it races on ovals, permanent road courses and temporary street circuits. Newgarden didn't understand the negativity, particularly after what appeared to be the largest crowd on the 20th anniversary of the first Grand Prix of St. Pete — one of the most popular races on the IndyCar 17-race calendar.

"I know it's subjective, and I'm trying to be sort of fair about this. The crowd was amazing. I've seen more people here than I've ever seen at an IndyCar race," Newgarden said after his win. "I saw more specific, current IndyCar team jerseys. I saw more kids. It looked really good to me. I've seen a ton of negative noise, and I get it. Everyone wants to jump on anything, but everything I experienced this weekend was pretty incredible."

Of course, the Newgarden we are about to witness this season has undergone some sort of transformation and has taken a positive — and perhaps isolated — view to a season. A two-time IndyCar champion and the reigning Indianapolis 500 winner seemingly lost his love of racing during last year's four-race winning season and has used deep reflection to recapture his passion.

"I'm definitely a perfectionist. I'm an introvert, but I get hyper fixated on just trying to maximize everything," he acknowledged. "It did start becoming a job ... but if you're fortunate enough to be here and do this, you should enjoy it. I'd always had it. I'd learned how to thrive in the pressure and still enjoy the job, and I think it just slipped away at one point.

"I was buried with a lot of other things, and I just tried to simplify my life and get back to happiness, and I think I've done that in a lot of ways. I feel really happy. I feel motivated."

Newgarden now speaks as if he expects a Max Verstappen-like season, where he wins every weekend and runs away with the championship. His offseason changes included closing the media company he co-owned, unfollowing every single person on social media, and the ending of the "Bus Bros," which was a popular social media show starring Newgarden and McLaughlin. Not only has the programming ended, but the one-time inseparable Penske besties seems to be professional with one another but at an arm's length in their personal relationship. When asked about Newgarden's intense new approach following Sunday's race, the former Bus Bro was remarkably fast to end the conversation.

"Doesn't affect me," McLaughlin said without blinking an eye.

The AP asked Penske if there's been a falling out between Newgarden and McLaughlin, and it was news to him. But in a lighthearted moment, he vowed to find out: "Gives me something to do," he laughed. Sounded a whole lot better than the pounding he'd taken all weekend, saved only by the pounding Team Penske gave right back in Sunday's race. ■

THE FOUR GRAND SLAMS, THE TWO TOURS AND SAUDI ARABIA ARE ALL HOPING TO REVAMP TENNIS

On this, the leaders of tennis can agree: There is more money out there to be made. And they see eye-to-eye on this, too: The sport's current structure could stand to change...

BY STAFF WRITER

On this, the leaders of tennis can agree: There is more money out there to be made. And they see eye-to-eye on this, too: The sport's current structure could stand to change. The how's and why's and when's of it all? Well, that's open to discussion — and there is plenty of that happening now behind closed doors, conversations and negotiations about the future of tennis among the folks who run the Grand Slam tournaments and other events, the women's WTA and men's ATP professional tours, the players, their agents and others with a hand in the sport, including Saudi Arabia's Private Investment Fund (known as the PIF, it is the entity behind LIV Golf).

There are two main proposals, both aimed at increasing revenue, seeking support at the moment: One, driven by the four Slams, would get rid of the current WTA-ATP structure and create a new Premier Tour (that's the working title) for roughly 100 women and 100 men and a lower-level Contenders Tour (another working title) with 75 to 100 tournaments open to roughly 200 women and 200 men, with all events hosting both genders with equal prize money; the other, driven by the ATP, would form a venture with the WTA to sell media rights and sponsorships but keep two separate tours for playing purposes, while bringing in an infusion of cash from the PIF in part by placing a Masters 1000 event in Saudi Arabia.

Why is this happening now? The sport is "underperforming," to use a word offered by Lew Sherr, the CEO of the U.S. Tennis Association, which runs the U.S. Open. And that, he explained to The Associated Press this week in a joint interview with Sally Bolton — CEO of the All England Club, which runs Wimbledon — is why the four most prestigious and most-watched tennis tournaments, a quartet that includes the Australian Open and French Open, are working together in what Sherr called an "unprecedented way" in an effort "to unlock what we think is an enormous potential."

Making tennis more fan-friendly — an easier-to-understand and shorter season, for example, and more consistency in TV broadcasts from week to week — could bring roughly a $1 billion increase in annual value, on top of the sport's current revenues of about $2.5 billion, Bolton estimated, by way of rights packages and increased sponsorship deals that could arise from more viewership. Bolton acknowledged nothing will happen "anytime before 2026," but said she thinks the project "can move relatively quickly" if they get others to buy in.

"The good news is we're sitting on the cusp of what

could be generational change for the better for a global sport," Ahmad Nassar, the executive director of the Professional Tennis Players Association, a group co-founded by 24-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic to represent the sport's athletes, said when asked for a general assessment of the state of play for tennis. "And that's exciting and a huge opportunity — as long as we don't squander it."

The ATP and WTA say they are looking into forming a combined "commercial entity," but otherwise are mostly staying mum publicly about what potentially is a significant moment for both. The ATP recently struck a deal with the PIF that includes naming rights for the men's rankings; that followed the placement of a year-end tournament for young players in Saudi Arabia. There already is a provision to allow the ATP to add a 10th Masters tournament, and Saudi Arabia could get that spot on the calendar. The WTA is expected to close a deal to put its annual season-ending championship in Saudi Arabia, and has also described itself, through a spokesperson, as exploring "whether we can bring greater alignment across the sport ... (and) reviewing the proposals that are being put forth by Saudi Arabia and the Grand Slams. There is a wave of interest in women's sport from fans and partners around the world, and we want to ensure that women's tennis is even bigger and better in the future."

A spokesperson for the PIF declined to comment. According to Bolton and Sherr, interviews with more than 5,000 fans around the world beginning in 2021 show 70% said the only tennis tournaments they watch are the Slams.

"The conclusion was that the season lacks consequence, that tennis is confusing to follow, and that fans don't understand which tournaments matter, and which don't, at any given point in the season. They know the four Slams. But other than that, there's not a compelling narrative," Sherr said. "We dilute and compete with ourselves by having two, three, four, five, six tournaments going on at any one point in time. And we're competing with our own product."

They made clear, though, they don't want to run the sport themselves. "Certainly not," Bolton said. Instead, they want a revamped, centralized leadership organization, with a board and a chairperson running things — perhaps a single commissioner, the way the top North American sports have — rather than today's setup of seven governing bodies: the federations that run the four Grand Slams, the two tours, plus the International Tennis Federation. The main tier would have the four Slam events, 10 other main tournaments and a year-end finals. There would be a "tour card" similar to what the PGA Tour has for golf, but also some sort of relegation-and-promotion system akin to European soccer leagues that would allow for movement between the Premier and Contender levels, perhaps via a year-end tournament. There would be an international team event. And a longer offseason of at least two months.

"The current model just isn't sustainable and could be doing much, much better. And so for us, the Premier Tour is one lever that allows us to address what's ailing the entirety of the sport. We've brought forward a vision that combines the men and women together, from Day 1 and forever more, in a gender-neutral sport that will better address the challenges," the USTA's Sherr said. "This is not a short-term Band-Aid. This is about really addressing how to deliver the sport to fans in a much more impactful way." ■

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